



***BEWARE THE STRATEGIC VACUUM:
THE REAL COST OF A THIRD FRONT***

BY YUJING SHENTU

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Weeks after the [12-day conflict](#) between Iran and Israel that led to the US striking Iranian facilities, tensions with Iran still threaten to spiral into deeper confrontation, and a quiet alarm is sounding in the Indo-Pacific. The risks of escalation in the Middle East are real—but the gravest danger may lie in underestimating the global consequences. The question is no longer theoretical: Can the US simultaneously manage Ukraine, Iran, and Taiwan without overextending its military and diplomatic bandwidth?

With US forces already heavily committed in Europe and the Gulf, opening a prolonged third front could embolden Beijing and Moscow to challenge American presence elsewhere. The Indo-Pacific—particularly the Taiwan Strait—may become the next test of resolve not because of what Washington does, but what it neglects to do. Strategic overextension might become the Achilles' heel of US global posture.

The "two-and-a-half wars" fallacy revisited

The Cold War-era doctrine of fighting “two and a half wars” is ill-suited to today’s distributed threats, hybrid warfare, and volatile alignment shifts. The US has long assumed it could sustain two major conflicts and deter a third. That premise is unraveling.

Ukraine alone has absorbed over \$75 billion in aid. Now, as tensions with Iran draw two carrier strike groups (USS *Nimitz* and *Carl Vinson*), stealth aircraft, strategic bombers, and 30 KC-135 tankers to the Gulf, according to the US Department of Defense. The military is approaching critical strain, a 50-60% reallocation of naval and air power would degrade surveillance, slow response times, and reduce US maritime presence in the Taiwan Strait and South China Sea. Should full-scale hostilities erupt, vital Indo-Pacific assets—surveillance, naval power, and ISR capabilities—could be diverted from the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM), undercutting deterrence in a region already under pressure. China and Russia are watching—and preparing to exploit.

Nuclear proliferation and the Moscow-Tehran link

One under-examined consequence of overreach is the accelerated breakdown of nuclear norms in the Middle East, with Russia as a potential silent partner. While a direct warhead transfer to Iran is improbable, covert assistance in enrichment technology or missile guidance could be Moscow’s asymmetric response to US over-commitment.

That would not only destabilize the region, but deepen the strategic bond between Tehran, Moscow, and Beijing—challenging both deterrence and the global nonproliferation regime.

Strategic risks across the map

If Washington gets bogged down in the Middle East, the strategic price won’t be confined to that region, the escalating risk of overextended global commitments are converging into a moment of maximum vulnerability. The vacuum will invite challenges elsewhere:

Taiwan and the South China Sea:

Without persistent forward presence, deterrence becomes ambiguous—and ambiguity invites miscalculation. In 2024 alone, China flew over 1,700 sorties into Taiwan’s ADIZ, according to Taiwan’s Ministry of National Defense—testing US resolve. Any perceived degradation of US presence could

embolden Beijing to escalate pressure on Taiwan through gray-zone tactics, including simulated blockades, coast guard provocations, and electronic warfare.

Global Energy and Finance:

A crisis in the Strait of Hormuz could spike oil prices and push more trade into non-dollar settlements, eventually undermining the financial foundation of US influence. Beijing has already positioned itself to weather such shocks by diversifying energy sources, stockpiling oil reserves at Pakistan's Gwadar Port, and expanding pipeline networks across Central Asia, also leveraging this instability to promote RMB-based oil settlements. Already, 28% of Saudi oil exports are transacted in RMB, according to Chinese customs and energy trade data. Block-chain systems backed by Chinese state banks, are bypassing SWIFT, particularly with Iran.

Diplomatic Realignment:

Beijing is positioning itself as a “neutral mediator” between Iran and Israel, backed by Moscow and Tehran, which shifts the narrative: portraying the US as part of the problem, not the solution. This effort is less about conflict resolution but more about realignment—shifting moral authority away from Washington, China's narrative of “anti-hegemonic multi-polarity” gains traction, especially in the Global South, where the US overreach and moral inconsistency are easy targets. If the US becomes entangled in the Middle East for an extended period, it risks ceding strategic bandwidth to adversaries—particularly Moscow which thrives in chaos and geopolitical distraction. Already, it is testing the limits in Ukraine, conducting influence operations in Africa, and bolstering proxy capabilities in the Middle East.

Proxy Spillover and Central Asia:

A weakened or cornered Iran may be driven to barter oil for advanced drones and radar systems, or missile technology from China and Russia—deepening a triangle of military cooperation. This convergence, seen in the "[Security Bond-2025](#)" drills, threatens to transform a regional crisis into a great-power proxy war, and complicates the US strategic calculus and

eroding its arms market leverage. Meanwhile, if Iran destabilizes, Beijing may suffer blowback in its western buffer zones. But the instability could also allow China to exploit the vacuum to deepen Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ties into Central Asia, expanding its influence across Eurasia. This includes deeper security linkages under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and integration of Middle East pipelines with China's western provinces, while building overland energy corridors that bypass Western routes entirely.

Policy recommendations: A strategic reset

Here is a **condensed strategic action plan** to guide US policy and avoid overreach:

1. Preserve Indo-Pacific deterrence

- Sustain rotational deployment of key naval and air assets in the Pacific.
- Accelerate asymmetric defense assistance to Taiwan, including ISR and coastal defense system.
- Expand agile combat employment and joint exercises with regional allies.
- Visibly reaffirm commitments through joint exercises and senior-level visits involving Taiwan, Japan, Australia, and the Philippines.

2. Reclaim Diplomatic Initiative

- Prioritize humanitarian de-escalation and post-conflict reconstruction.
- Use quiet backchannel diplomacy to align with European and Arab partners on crisis management.
- Monitor and diplomatically counter China's push for RMB oil transactions, especially within BRICS and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) forums.
- Reclaim diplomatic leadership with a multilateral peace initiative at the UN, engaging Gulf States, Egypt, and Turkey.

3. Secure Energy and Financial Stability

- Counter China's push for RMB oil trade in BRICS and GCC platforms.
- Deepen energy coordination with India, Japan, and the EU, to safeguard chokepoints and reserves.
- Expand US LNG export capacity and increase maritime resiliency.

4. Limit Russian Opportunism

- Prioritize nuclear containment, deterrence, and regional stability over regime change rhetoric for diplomatic contingencies at the UN Security Council
- Deliver high-level warnings to Moscow against any nuclear assistance to Iran.
- Increase intelligence cooperation with the IAEA and Middle Eastern allies.
- Form multilateral security coalitions with NATO, the EU, India, and Gulf States in any strategic moves on Iran, to limit Moscow's ability to exploit the US distraction.
- Prioritize nuclear containment, deterrence, and regional stability over regime change in Iran.
- Employ cyber, financial, and media tools to expose Russian subversion in Iranian and Middle Eastern affairs.

5. Counter Authoritarian Realignment

- Enforce targeted secondary sanctions on entities facilitating sensitive military defense transfers.
- Re-engage Central Asia with alternative infrastructure and trade.
- Enhance CENTCOM and Fifth Fleet coordination with Gulf allies to counter asymmetric threats like drones or cyber-attacks.
- Coordinate with India and Turkey to promote multipolar stability in the region and prevent a Beijing- Moscow centric Eurasian realignment.
- Tie Iran policy to the global defense of a rules-based order against authoritarian realignment, allows Washington to keep

Europe, Asia, and the Global South aligned to block wedge strategies and diplomatic room to maneuver.

Grand Strategy—Not global whack-a-mole

America's challenge is not insufficient power, but a lack of strategic discipline. Without recalibration now to invest in resilience at home and abroad, Washington risks handing its adversaries precisely what they seek: a fractured US posture, overstretched and reactive.

To endure in an age of contested multi-polarity, the United States must invest in strategic discipline, economic resilience, and multilateral diplomacy. Economic strength, energy security, and political stability at home allow the US to operate globally without distraction or overreaction—reducing the chance of Moscow and Beijing exploiting internal division. Strategic restraint—when coupled with clarity of purpose—is not a weakness. It is the wisdom of a superpower determined to last.

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